

*...follow don't wallow...*

A four week Advent course by Hayley Matthews based on the Advent daily readings in The Bishop of Leeds', Nick Baines, book *Freedom is Coming*.

## **Week Four**

**'Joy and peace, exodus and return. Change and transformation as God's people grapple together with the challenge of being like the God who has created, called, shaped, forgiven and renewed them. This is the promise to the exiles: you shall exodus in joy and you shall return (be led – again, you need a saviour) in peace... and this will only be the beginning of a new journey, a new life, in a place that is both familiar and yet different. God is faithful; will you be faithful to [God's] call?' (p112, *Freedom is Coming*, Baines).**

Joy and peace go hand in hand as do exodus and return. You cannot have one without the other. I'd go as far as saying that you cannot have either without being changed for nothing transforms a person like joy does, bringing light back to the eyes of those whose path is still littered with suffering with no certainty as to its end. Yet only God's peace allows that joy to surface and that entails the hard work and commitment of relinquishing our identities as victims, enemies or simply the misunderstood. We have to find peace with ourselves and peace with others in order to truly rest in the peace of God. It is in the depths of that well that joy dwells, irrepressibly bubbling up through layer upon layer of hardship, pain and sorrow, unable to be contained.

It is that centred peace in ourselves and our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ that renews our outlook, our strength, our relationships, our ability to follow, to see the vision, to make the right choices for the greater good even when that might not suit our own selves. Who has not stood in the presence of an ordinary saint, knowing that just being beside them brought us peace, too? It is tangible, filtering into the hardest of hearts, drawing us into the longing and yearning of God to have all know their worth and their place in the family of God.

Joy is similarly infectious; but to see someone exuding joy from a place of great pain and sorrow, from one who bears scar upon scar from a life that hasn't been fair or kind, how can one not be immediately curious about the source of such a gift? For as we are joined with Jesus in His suffering, as we open ourselves to bear the wounds of His love, we find that the transformation not only enlightens our own hearts but draws others to His flame.

It's why Isaiah is so very clear that those led out through an exodus of any kind return with singing, unable to contain their joy, not because they've gone back to the old and known, the tried and trusted, things as they were before the horrid bit, but conversely, because through walking through the valley of the shadow of death, led and supported by God's rod and staff, has completely transformed them. Whatever their circumstances, they now know how to walk in joy and peace, open to the possibility that life will never again be as it was but that whatever it might be, God is with them, and God is all they need. That they can trust that this new life has always been the promise for a pilgrim people called not to wallow, but *to follow*.

Advent heralds the birthing of a new year, a new era; a Christ wrapped in flesh and blood immersed in the reality of all we faced then – and now. We can stay huddled in the stable, bemoaning the poor accommodation and lack of interest from others, or we can gird up our loins and strike out on this new adventure. What will it be?

## Reflection and discussion

1. What difficult moment in your life most changed you?
2. When have you felt that God's peace made an unbearable situation bearable?
3. How does joy differ from happiness? Is there another word that could be used?
4. How does it feel to think that it's possible we really must leave all that we've known behind in order to move forward with God at this time of unprecedented change?
5. Can you imagine feeling courageous enough to set off with God, not knowing where God was leading you to? What would you rely on? How might that transform you?

## Prayer

God of joy and peace, exodus and return  
Help us to trust you on ways unknown  
Through times of such significant change  
We cannot imagine what awaits us on our return.  
Help us not to be so wedded to the past  
That we refuse the gift of Your future;  
Help us to know what to carry with us  
To be treasured for future generations  
And what to leave behind that we may travel lightly  
Carrying only the weight of Your peace  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.